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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policy makers as well as teachers, this digest presents a selection of reactions to "A Nation at Risk," the report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The five parts of the digest discuss the five major recommendations of the commission's report concerning curriculum, standards and expectations, time use, the teaching profession, and leadership and support, and present responses to each recommendation by educators in English and the language arts. (HTH)

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ERIC Digest

Responses of the English Language Arts Profession to A Nation at Risk

Fran Lehr

With more than four million copies in print, A Nation at Risk, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, is perhaps the most widely circulated and cited report on education ever produced in the United States. The 36-page report, with its now-famous contention that the educational foundations of the country are being eroded by "a rising tide of mediocrity," has created a national debate on the quality of American schools unmatched since the post-Sputnik days of the late 1950s.

Educators have viewed the report with mixed emotions. Some have welcomed it as a means of calling attention to the needs of education, while others have criticized it as a simplistic response to complex educational problems. This digest will present a selection of reactions to the report by English/Language Arts educators, specifically as they relate to its five major recommendations concerning curriculum, standards and expectations, time use, the teaching profession, and leadership and support.

CURRICULUM

Calling the secondary school curriculum a "cafeteria" in which "the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses," the report recommends that high schools adopt a required core curriculum, which it terms "The New Basics." The curriculum would include four years of English; three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies; and one-half year of

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computer science. Specifically, the English curriculum would equip students to read, write, listen, and discuss effectively and would familiarize them with "our literary heritage."

William Irmscher, professor of English at the University of Washington and past president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), comments that he "would be worried about a restaurant or a curriculum that would serve the same main course to everyone." A uniform curriculum, he continues, "does not address the needs and interests of many students, particularly those who are not college bound."

Marilyn Wilson, professor of English at Michigan State University, responds that "on the surface" of the recommendation "one would find little to quibble about, except perhaps for the issue of whose literary heritage should be learned, given the diverse literature growing out of our multi-ethnic/cultural society." She questions, however, the nature of the content recommended for English study. "What is apparently valued is an academic orientation to the tasks of reading and writing, focusing on information, message, comprehension. Where is the concern for the personal experience and the emotional, as well as intellectual, investment in reading and writing necessary for creating life-long readers and writers?"

John Maxwell, Executive Director of NCTE, approves of the call for four years of English, but expresses regret that the report does not address "the real concern" of English teachers--class size. "Eighty percent of what colleges and the public expect as a result of a high school education is the main subject matter of English," Maxwell contends, "and we receive only 20 percent of the main resource, which is time. We need smaller classes to get the job done."

STANDARDS AND EXPECTATIONS

The report's second recommendation is for more rigorous and measurable standards, for higher expectations, and for more challenging materials. To achieve this, it recommends stricter grading, higher college admissions standards, more standardized testing to measure student performance against national norms, and upgraded and updated textbooks that reflect current scholarship and research.

Herbert Ramlose, English teacher at Zion-Benton (Illinois) High School, provides a classroom teacher's perspective by suggesting that in preparing its report the Commission on Excellence neglected to consider the causes for declining test scores and lowered admissions standards--the recognition on the part of educators that many students had been poorly prepared for college because of longstanding discriminatory practices, and the desire of educators to practice as well as preach equality of opportunity. Ramlose argues that "to tighten entrance requirements now and restrict those who are first starting to realize the power of knowledge and their own potential may undo all the gains made in educational opportunity and equality."

Marilyn Wilson, reacting to the report's emphasis on standardized testing to measure performance, contends that "the very nature of such tests, rather than helping to uphold standards, may, in fact, be contributing to their decline." Student reading difficulties, she explains, may be the result of current testing practices, since standardized tests rely on multiple choice questions and stress knowledge of facts rather than understanding.

In its call for improved textbooks, the report does not mention the role of censorship in shaping textbook content. William Irmscher, however, maintains that there are more than 300

groups in the United States that exist for the purpose of protesting textbook content, and that publishers often respond to the demands of these groups rather than to the demands and needs of educators.

TIME USE

The report's third recommendation concerns the use of time. Specifically, it asks for a longer school day and year and for better use of the existing school day, with students assigned more homework than they are now.

International Reading Association (IRA) past president Jack Cassidy of Millersville State College in Pennsylvania, comments that a longer school day could produce more time on academic tasks, and thus prompt more learning. But R. Baird Shuman, professor of English at the University of Illinois, refers to this recommendation as "questionable," and points out that it could cost billions of dollars in increased salaries and utility bills. "And," Shuman continues, "little research exists to suggest that positive educational benefits would be derived from it."

According to the research department of the IRA in its extensive response to the report, research does exist to support the recommendation for more homework. After examining 15 studies of homework, the IRA concluded that it was "associated with uniformly positive effects on factual, conceptual, critical, attitudinal, and other aspects of learning."

THE TEACHING PROFESSION

The report's fourth recommendation consists of seven parts, each pertaining to the preparation of teachers and to the improvement of the teaching profession. They include calls for raised

standards for teacher candidates, increased salaries, more effective teacher evaluation systems, and the creation of master teacher programs and merit pay incentives.

Olive Niles of the Connecticut State Department of Education and an IRA past president, supports the call for improved teacher preparation. Calling it "the most important recommendation made," she asserts that "if we have better teachers, we'll get better results."

R. Baird Shuman agrees that "the schools cannot change drastically until teacher education changes." Teacher education institutions must move, he believes, to offer more diverse training to prospective English teachers, requiring of them courses in grammar, the history of the language, and techniques for teaching students to speak and listen effectively.

Virtually all educators agree with the call for higher salaries, and most express the belief that better pay would alleviate the problem of attracting brighter students to teaching. Merit pay, however, is not so widely accepted. A major concern of classroom teachers, as expressed by English teacher Glenda Heflin of Trimpe Junior High School in Bethalto, Illinois, is that "merit pay must not be based solely upon an administrator's appraisal of the teacher's competence, since administrators may tend to devalue and 'rate down' teachers who express dissenting views."

The subject of improved teacher evaluation systems was addressed by Skip Nicholson, an English teacher in the Burbank, California, public schools and Chair of NCTE's Secondary Section, who believes that English departments, as well as other subject area departments, should have control over evaluation, "as well as over choosing textbooks and scheduling students."

Two past presidents of the IRA, Ira Aaron of the University of Georgia and Jack Cassidy, support the master teacher concept. Maintaining that the idea is not a new one, Aaron sees the creation of master teacher programs as an opportunity for reading specialists, while Cassidy thinks such programs "could give some teachers a status they have long deserved." However, another IRA past president,Kenneth Goodman, has some reservations. "Nobody is really opposed to the idea of singling out effective teachers," he comments, "but it does create a situation in which school boards are given a lever for dividing teachers."

LEADERSHIP AND FISCAL SUPPORT

The final recommendation of the report asks that (1) principals and superintendents assume leadership roles in developing community support for school reform, (2) school boards help them carry out their leadership role, (3) state and local officials incorporate the proposed reforms into their policies and fiscal planning, (4) the federal government help in funding and supporting education, and (5) the public provide financial support to accomplish reform.

While endorsing these recommendations, William Irmscher nonetheless has doubts that state and local governments will accept the responsibility placed on them, and Glenda Heflin has similar reservations about the willingness of school officials to lead in the pursuit of education excellence. "School boards and administrators," she argues, "seek to preserve the status quo. They strive to keep the schools culture-bound, rather than future-bound." If the reforms called for are to be forthcoming, Heflin continues, "officials need to set aside their own self-serving interests, and perhaps even suffer a loss of power....Boards of education and administrators need to encourage a spirit of inquiry, foster an environment of civil dissent, and

insist upon a free exploration of ideas in order to blow away the cobweb of stagnated beliefs that no longer allows excellence to be pursued."

George Douglas, professor of English at the University of Illinois, examines the call for public support of the schools and affirms that "it is not true, and has never been true that education is the sole responsibility of the schools." Explaining that the educational system will function well if adequately supported and funded by federal and state governments, Douglas maintains that many of the most serious problems education faces are "due neither to lack of financial support nor to failure from within, but to a failure of will--and this on the part of the American public in general."

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills

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Responses of English Language Arts Professionals to *A Nation at Risk*

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